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Uncorrected Author's proof

In search of amber: Long distance directional movement between Bronze Age Ireland and Denmark, and an analogy from the early medieval literature of Ireland.

Introduction

In essence, this is a two part paper. The first part discusses some of the evidence for long distance directional travel during the Bronze Age along a particular axis; a route between Ireland and Denmark, which seems, at least from an Irish perspective, to have become particularly important in the later Bronze Age. The second part is concerned with one of the many questions which are much more difficult to address from looking at the archaeological record alone. In particular, it tries to consider the social context in which such journeys might have been undertaken. It is here that insight drawn from an analogy with the laws, sagas and poetry of early medieval Ireland can profitably be used. In this literature we can find an example of the types of people who might have travelled, how hospitality might have been given and received, and details of some of the rites which might have accompanied travel; in sum how travel could have been socially and ritually facilitated.

The selection of early medieval Ireland as an analogy

Before continuing, an explication of the choice of early medieval Irish literature as an analogy and a theoretical discussion on the general use of analogy is warranted. Analogy, it can be argued, lies at the basis of all human cognition (Hofstadter 2001). This is particularly true of the process of extrapolating wider social meanings from the material culture of prehistory, for we are, after all, only dealing with scattered fragments from the past as they exist in the present. One does not simply progress from distributions of bronze objects, and other empirical categories of information, to insight about the Bronze Age society without some form of analogy. The choices lie in whether one is implicit, or explicit, about the process and in whether one draws on analogy with one's own experience of the world, or employs examples of societies from other times and places. The former choice is a question of openness; the more explicit one is about one's interpretative leaps the easier it is to assess or re-evaluate one's argument, or allow others to do the same. The latter largely concerns the appropriateness of the analogy; how one conceives of the world today is likely to be quite different to how people did so in the past and it is often possible to find societies with more in common with those in the past than ours, but it may also have a bearing on the level of explicitness. When drawing on information from societies with which one has not grown up within, like when using a language in which one is not native (Hofstadter 2001: 125-126), one is forced to be more explicit about meaning¹. On the other hand analogies drawn from our own experiences, so called 'common sense approaches', are more likely to have implicit meaning, or in other words, are more likely to be riddled with ethnocentric bias.

In a search for analogies this paper looks to the texts of medieval Ireland and argues that these may provide particularly fruitful insights for a variety of reasons. Firstly, although the practice of hospitality and the related practices of gift giving are so widespread in pre-market societies (Mauss 2002 [1925]) that they could be considered an almost human universal, there is debatably a particular character to hospitality as expressed in the oral histories and early literature of Europe and its neighbouring areas. From Medieval Ireland (O'Sullivan 2004), to Anglo-Saxon England (Gautier 2009), to Iron Age and medieval Northern Europe (Enright 1996), to the later Bronze Age of the Mediterranean (Reece 1993), common motifs can

¹ Hofstadter gives the example of how in Italian soccer parlance the word *suggerimento* (literally "suggestion") is used in an analogous way to describe a particular type of pass that contains a message. Since he is not a native speaker he is forced to grapple and explicitly outline the nuances of the term.

traced. Of these corpora, early Irish literature arguably constitutes one of the richest; it is certainly one of the most copious. Since this author is primarily a Bronze Age archaeologist, he claims no particular speciality on the subject. However, comprehensive explorations of the theme of hospitality in this material, by recognised authorities (Simms 1978; O'Sullivan 2004), provide sufficient insight to use it as a source of analogy.

Secondly, there may arguably be elements of 'direct historical continuity'. While in Ireland, it is no longer naïvely thought that the early medieval sagas provide "a window" on later prehistory (Jackson 1964 [1999]), there would still seem to be much of value to the prehistoric archaeologist. Archaeologically, continuity of cultic practice is demonstrable at the major royal sites, and increasingly excavation of other burial sites is revealing a continuity of more widespread practices from later prehistory into the early medieval period (Waddell 2011: 195). It is clear that we should not be searching the literature for actual events which happened in prehistory; however, themes, practices and motifs that clearly relate to a pre-Christian past are plainly evident. Finally, through a consideration of the context in which hospitality was given and received it may be possible to approach a 'relational analogy'.

Deep rooted connections

When viewed over the *longue durée*, and at a macro-scale, it is evident that there was a considerable flow of traffic between the North-Sea and Atlantic networks (Cunliffe 2001). Contacts between Ireland and Denmark have deep roots, at least as early as the late Neolithic/Chalcolithic and earlier Bronze Age, and were likely driven, at least in part, by the latter's lack of native metal sources. While, from a Danish perspective, the quantity of material may appear minor in comparison to that which arrived from central European sources (Vandkilde 1996: 294-308), objects from Ireland and/or Britain did end up in the archaeological record of Denmark and southern Sweden. Even a conservative estimation, from 1968 (Harbison), based on object form, clearly illustrates this point. Subsequent studies of metal composition, and more recent isotopic analysis, support a British/Irish origin for these objects, such as the flat axe from the Pile hoard from southern Sweden (Vandkilde pers comm). The rarity of objects of Irish/British forms does not diminish their importance, rather it may have enhanced it and their occasional imitation, in other metals by local smiths, underlines how their significance might have been perceived. While it is possible that these items reached Denmark and Sweden via a land route across the continent, their occurrence in this maritime region with few intermediaries, might be construed as suggesting their directional arrival by sea; a potential surely underlined by the wealth of maritime iconography from Scandinavia's Bronze Age (Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995; Kaul 1998). On-going isotope analyses by Johan Ling appears to suggest that a substantial amount of the raw materials in artefacts of non-Irish/British form, in both the earlier and later Bronze Age, may also have originated in Ireland or Britain (Ling et al. 2013).

One possible axis of interaction from Ireland to Denmark is via south-western and eastern Scotland and then across the North Sea. The first link in this chain between north-eastern Ireland and south-western Scotland is, from a geographical perspective, no surprise. As one would expect, coastal communities living so close were in frequent contact, so frequently that at least in some periods they are likely to have considered themselves one community. Certainly by the early historic period, communities on both sides of this stretch of sea spoke the same language and even fell within one kingdom (Lane and Campbell 2000). Neolithic interaction between these regions is perhaps best illustrated by the exchange of axes of traceable lithology, such as porcellanite from Northern Ireland (Sheridan 1986), and shared

monument types (Waddell 1991/1992: 32). From the Early Bronze Age, ‘bowl tradition’ pottery (2160-1920 BC after Brindley 2007) points to continued interaction along this route as far as the east coast of Scotland (Waddell 2010: 153), perhaps indicating the movement of potters through a pattern of marital exchange. The distribution of the later Cordoned Urn tradition pottery (1730-1500 BC after Brindley 2007) is once again strikingly consistent with this axis of interaction (Waddell 2010: 160) and interestingly, for our discussion, the distribution of this pottery tradition has previously been interpreted as potentially representing important middlemen in the transmission of products from the copper workshops of south-west Ireland to Scotland and beyond (Waddell 1995: 162). These are just a few of many distributions of material culture which could be quoted as evidencing the recurring contact along this axis. What they indicate is intense interaction from Ireland to the east of Scotland, in the direction of Denmark, both over a long period of time and connected with the flow of metal.

Later Bronze Age amber

However, it is in the later Bronze Age when this axis more certainly extends to Denmark. At this time considerable quantities of Baltic amber occur in Irish deposits (Eogan 1999), especially of the Dowris phase (Eogan 1983)². A corpus study of Irish amber has been undertaken (Feeney 1976), but, apart from a distribution of its occurrence in hoards (Eogan 1999), it has not been published. While a number of beads have been found on settlements, all of the more impressive collections come from hoards of a probable votive nature. Individual collections of beads often number in the hundreds, with the largest beads reaching up to 67mm in diameter (Feeney 2012).

Some of the most impressive collections include: over 500 beads, including a number of spacer beads suggesting a complex multi-strand necklace, retrieved from a bog in Derrybrien, Co. Galway (Prendergast and Mitchell 1960); over 400 beads from Kurrin Moss, near Garvagh, Co. Derry (Flanagan 1962: 92-93); over 250 beads from Whitegates, Co. Meath (MacWhite 1944: 127); a collection of over 200 beads were found in Ballycurrin on the shores of Lough Corrib, Co. Mayo (Briggs 1997) and over 100 beads from Tooradoo, Co. Limerick (Gogan 1932) (Fig. 1). In addition to the spacer beads from Derrybrien, mentioned above, several other collections of beads also contained examples with more than one perforation (Feeney 1976).

In some cases bronze and/or gold objects were deposited with amber (Eogan 1983). Of particular note are a class of perforated bronze ring (Fig. 1), that a number of researchers have speculated may have operated as spacers in amber necklaces or other combined bronze and amber ornaments (Pearce 1979: 128), however this combination remains speculative. The combination of amber with gold seems more persistent and definite. A possible gold clasp accompanied the Derrybrien necklace mentioned above (Cahill 2006: 292). Gold and amber beads, found together at Cruttenclough, near Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny (Coffey 1896: 38), may have been part of the one necklace (Fig. 2). Some particularly large gold beads, from Tumna, Co. Roscommon, have been deemed to copy the form of amber beads (Cahill 2004) and gold was incorporated into an amber bead, from Milmorone Co. Cork (Cahill 2006: 292).

All of the Irish amber finds that have been subjected to scientific characterisation to date³ have proved of Baltic type (Feeney 2012) and as Eogan has previously argued (Eogan 1999)

² Amber is scarce, but not unknown, in Irish deposits of an earlier date (Eogan 1999, Dowd 2009)

³ Further characterisation of amber from Irish prehistoric contexts is currently being undertaken by Lisa Moloney at Sligo Institute of Technology, Ireland.

the sheer amount of beads suggests they must have originated in the Nordic/Baltic zone, most probably Denmark and not on the west coast of Britain or from deposits of similar resinous material in Ireland (contra Briggs 1997). The distribution of amber from hoards in Britain and Ireland during the later Bronze Age is striking (Fig. 3); the only concentration of deposition in Britain, other than Anglesey which is likely to have Irish connections, is in eastern Scotland⁴ along the previously indicated route to Denmark. It could be argued that the concentration of amber in Ireland simply reflects a differential pattern of hoarding practice (Beck and Shennan 1991: 103), however even the drop rate of non-hoarded amber on Irish settlement sites appears significantly higher.

For all of Britain, Beck and Shennan could only list 6 settlement contexts in which amber was found and of those only one had over 10 beads (Beck and Shennan 1991). Furthermore only one LBA amber bead from Britain, Gentanar, Aberdeenshire (Pearce 1979), had a transverse perforation suggestive of a spacer bead. In Ireland, at Dun Aonghasa alone (a Late Bronze Age hillfort on an island off the west coast of Ireland), the remains of at least 13 and possibly as many as 15 beads, were found during the excavation (Feeney 2012). At least one of those beads was perforated in two directions suggesting it may have acted as a spacer bead from a substantial necklace. Other Irish Late Bronze Age habitation sites, such as Ballinderry II (Hencken 1941/1942), Knocknalappa, Co. Clare (Raftery 1942, Grogan, O'Sullivan et al. 1999), Rathgall, Co. Wicklow (Raftery 1974), Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo (Walsh 1996) and Clonfinlough, Co. Offaly (Maloney and Jennings 1993), have also turned up finds of non-hoarded amber. It seems clear that, even though the difference between the amount of amber accidentally lost on settlements in Ireland and Britain is not as pronounced as between that which was deposited in hoards; the combined differences suggest elite groups in Ireland were actively seeking amber and had the means to largely bypass Britain when obtaining it.

Influence on metal forms

There may also be influence from Denmark detectable on Irish later Bronze Age metal forms (Waddell 2010: 271-273). The most commonly cited Irish object type is the disc headed pin with a central projection, either with straight or bent⁵ stems (Eogan 1974). These are relatively common in Ireland but are very rare in Britain and those that do occur have swan-shaped stems, and are, like hoards of amber, restricted to Scotland⁶. The comparison of form, decoration and technique, between the Irish and Danish examples, is remarkable. A number of the Irish examples are even covered with sheet gold (Raftery 1971) in a manner similar to those of the *Nordische Kreis*, predominantly found in Denmark (Badou 1960). Of particular interest here are the pins from the Ballytegan hoard⁷, of which Raftery suggested at least two might actually be Danish imports (1971). Raftery also noted another unusual object type in the Ballytegan hoard, a bracelet sized, triple ring of twisted bronze strands joined by a small binding ring. Through a search of Irish Museums he found four similar objects and through an international search revealed their closest parallels to once more be in northern Europe and most numerous in Denmark (Baudou 1960). It should be noted that this has been hotly disputed by Joan Taylor who has written of 'the myth of Nordic influence' (Taylor 1980: 53-59). She believed that these forms originated from common ancestor types in the Únětice culture and argued that the main flow of influence on metalwork in the British Isles came

⁴ A group traditionally referred to as the 'Covesea group' (Pearce 1979) once thought to be an intrusive group from the North German plain.

⁵ In Ireland those with bent stems are commonly referred to as Sunflower pins

⁶ These are again connected with the aforementioned 'Covesea tradition'

⁷ Thanks are due to Mary Cahill of the NMI for pointing out to me the potential importance of the Ballytegan hoard

from central Europe via France. Through concentrating on the Nordic axis here, it is not disputed that contact with northern France was one of the main influences on Britain and Ireland; traffic and two-way influence between these regions was intense. Like the contacts between Ireland and Scotland, it probably involved intermarriage and very consistent interaction, in a form similar to Needham's concept of the English Channel 'Maritory' (2009). However, Taylor's argument (1980) primarily referred to earlier gold-work, such as that in the Derrinboy hoard⁸, and it is contended here that much of Eogan and Raftery's assertions about connections reflected in later items, such as the pins, remain valid. Furthermore, it is the suggestion of long distance directional travel, to or from Denmark, and a different type of interaction that marked amber in the Irish Later Bronze Age as special.

Long distance directional travel

So why long distance directional travel as opposed to down-the-line exchange? As with elsewhere in Europe, there is evidence in the Irish archaeological record for long distance interaction from before and throughout the later Bronze Age. However, while much of this may have been conducted as down the line exchange, one could argue on the basis of the particular referencing of the exotic inherent in the Baltic Amber that occurs in Irish hoards of the later Bronze Age and its virtual absence from the archaeological record in between Ireland and its origin (Fig. 3), that it may have been obtained through long distance directional travel. If the hoard distribution reflects a true path, it may even be that the trans-Scotland route mentioned earlier was partially bypassed and that a northern route around Scotland, but still disembarking from eastern Scotland, was employed. It is especially interesting, in this vein, to note the occurrence of a pin mould, of the sunflower type mentioned above, at Jarlshof on Shetland (Eogan 1974: 79).

The analogy: Hospitality in early Irish literature

So where in the early Irish literature do we find reference to hospitality, how is it portrayed and how might it help us understand long distance travel in the Bronze Age? Well, it is embedded in almost all of the literature (O'Sullivan 2004). Its importance and the rules surrounding it are clearly outlined in the law texts⁹. "To refuse food and shelter where it.. [was] due... [was] to be guilty of... *esáin* literally 'driving away'" (Kelly 1988: 140). A maritime law text also once existed. This would have contained much of interest to our topic, however unfortunately all that survives today is various references to this text in other documents. Reference to hospitality is common in poetry, in both praise poetry and in *Áer* or defamatory satire. This was serious business, not just frivolous entertainment. Poetry was believed to have a magical quality and in practical terms the damage to the prestige of a lord satirized for not being hospitable enough, could lead to his downfall (Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh 2007: 17-18). Details of how hospitality was received or given are also found throughout the sagas and myths. Among these the *Immrama* or voyage texts are of particular interest to our consideration of long distance travel and to how that was conceived.

So who was travelling and why?

The law texts reveal who was likely to have been travelling. While all freemen were entitled to hospitality, early medieval Ireland was a very stratified society, and one's rank dictated

⁸ Now known to be Middle Bronze Age (1740-1450 Cal BC at 95% probability) in date (Cahill 2006: 273) and believed to represent the revival of an earlier embossed tradition already extant in the British Isles (Needham 2000: 50).

⁹ In secular law, but also in Ecclesiastic law, where it is a native element that was blended with Christian doctrine to create a uniquely Irish church (O'Sullivan 2004: 20)

how much hospitality was due. For example, a *Fer midboth*, a semi-independent young man who occupied temporary huts on his father's land, was entitled to one day's unaccompanied accommodation (O'Sullivan 2004: 31-32) while a *bóaire*, a higher grade of farmer, was entitled to three days with three persons (ibid.). Nobles were of course entitled to even more hospitality. It is difficult to know if rank could have been communicated cross-culturally in prehistory, but in medieval Ireland dress pins or broaches played an important role, and this does bring to mind the shared pin styles of later prehistory mentioned earlier. While no direct historical continuity in form or style is suggested here, the practice of communicating status specifically through the wearing of pins may well have been a well-established pattern from later prehistory across Northern Europe.

It is also clear that, like has often been suggested for the Bronze Age, many skilled persons travelled to ply their respective trades. The law texts outline the amount of hospitality that was due to different types of professions in a prescribed fashion (O'Sullivan 2004: 31-33). For example a blacksmith, brazier, whitesmith, physician or jurist was entitled to three days hospitality with four persons in their company. Other classes, such as chariot-wrights, shield-makers, were only entitled to one day's hospitality and were not permitted to bring additional persons. However, it is also clear that if an individual was master of more than one of these trades then the amount of hospitality due increased (ibid.).

Poets and other persons of art

Poets, musicians and jesters also travelled to ply their trade. Entertainment was in effect a way of reciprocating hospitality, and we might imagine such a scenario in prehistory. In medieval Ireland poets manipulated this social institution. The perceived power of poetry was mentioned above; an *Áer*, or defamatory satire, was often given in the form of a curse or spell and there are many tales of enraged poets bringing destruction upon unwelcoming hosts. This is a 9th century poem written by the poet Caripre when he was not satisfied with the hospitality which he received.

*Without food speedily on a platter
Without a cow's milk whereon a calf thrives
Without a man's habitation after the staying of darkness
Be that the luck of Bres Mac Eladain (Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh 2007: 17)*

This is clearly in the form of a curse and in the connected tale it eventually led to the downfall of the satirized Bres. In what was still essentially a northwest European style of a gift economy, where fame was more important than wealth, the power of poetry stemmed from the importance of prestige it could confer or detract. A chief poet had an equal rank with a low grade of king (Kelly 1988: 36-7). The fact that poets could manipulate the system like this arguably speaks of a very different society than that in which we live today.

The *briugu*

A special class of hospitaller the *briugu* existed in Ireland right up until the final demise of Gaelic society in the 16th century AD (Kelly 1988: 37) and study of the word's etymology suggest it is of a very archaic formation (Mac Eoin 1999). Combining the broadly similar descriptions from the various tales it is clear that a hostel was a kind of "feasting hall at a meeting of several thoroughfares where unlimited hospitality was dispensed to all comers from cauldrons" (McCone 1984). Surely here we can see echoes of older traditions. The description brings to mind the great cauldrons of the Later Bronze Age, of which Ireland had a considerable number (Gerloff 2010).

Through taking on the office of *briugu* a wealthy man of non-noble birth could acquire high rank through displaying hospitality and generosity. A chief *briugu* had equal rank with a chief poet or low grade of king (Kelly 1988: 36-37). Once again we can see the focus is on prestige. It could be gained through providing hospitality and lost through being accused of not properly providing it.

The Immrama

The *Immrama* are the voyage tales of early Irish literature. The most famous is probably the 7th century AD voyage of St Brendan, but along with the other ecclesiastical tales there are secular tales, such as the Voyage of Bran. Although written down by monks, the voyage of Bran is at least as old as the 6th century and would seem to have many of some roots in earlier oral traditions (Mac Mathúna 1985). The secular voyage tales normally takes the form of a quest for knowledge, revenge, or atonement, and involve travel over the sea to strange lands, where nonetheless, hospitality was still expected and often received. Significantly, travel over distances in both these and the ecclesiastical tales is often equated with travel to an otherworld, cosmic travel, something which may have been conceived of similarly in prehistory. This is an idea which many prehistorians believe is expressed in the Bronze Age Nebra Sky disc, at least during the later phases of its use (Meller 2004) and one which Mary Helms has shown to be a common cross-cultural belief (Helms 1988).

In the ecclesiastical tales it is religious specialists who travelled. However, here the analogy is not so apt, or at least can only be taken so far. The Irish ecclesiasts were on a form of *perigrinata*, an act reflecting a distinctly Christian ideology. What may be of interest is the otherworldly aspect of long distance travel evident in both the ecclesiastical and secular *immrama*. This is similar to many ethnographic examples in Mary Helms' book 'Ulysses' sail' (1988), where the long distance travel is often portrayed as a journey to the otherworld, over the horizon at sea. In Helms' examples this was often connected with the acquisition of esoteric items, and/or knowledge, from distant places, carried out in order to confer status on emerging elites. The archaeological record of the later Bronze Age in Ireland suggests such an emergence of elites (Waddell 2010: 233-290); and it seems likely that amber was particularly valued for its esoteric origin and may have been emblematic of those journeys to the otherworld. The distance of directional travel along this chain is not necessarily at issue, what is important is that it involved travel through the territory of groups with which the travellers would not normally have been in contact with. It is exactly this type of journey that would have been worthy of a saga.

Understanding how material things were valued in the past reaches right to the heart of Bronze Age ontologies. The very term 'value' covers a number of inter-related concepts that can be divided into: 'values' in the sociological sense, 'value' in the economic sense and value in the structural linguistic sense (Graeber 2001). In our own society, while distinct, these concepts clearly overlap. In societies where the economy is more socially and ritually embedded, such as Late Bronze Age and early medieval Ireland, the separation of these concepts is likely to have been far less coherent. Something of how amber was valued can perhaps be perceived by its occasional association with gold, a material long associated with sun symbolism and other ritual contexts. The sacred nature of the journey of the sun over the horizon, and attempts to illustrate where it went at night is a common motif in Bronze Age Europe (Kaul 1998: 258-265; Kristiansen 2010; Waddell 2012) and may have had a role in the proliferation of the sacred nature of travel in Bronze Age Europe; amber was likely to have been intimately connected with this.

Conclusions

It may be that, from a Nordic perspective, Bronze Age connections with central Europe were more consistent and influential than those with Ireland and Britain. In a similar way, Ireland and Britain's connections with closer continental areas were probably more consistent. However, there was two-way interaction between Ireland and Denmark, perhaps involving great sea journeys, and those are the type of interactions that may have been worthy of comparison with travel to the otherworld and may have spawned great sagas. Like in our early medieval analogy, a developed social institution of hospitality could have existed, where to provide hospitality would have increased one's fame, status and prestige, and perhaps allowed one to rise in social rank. Travellers might have reciprocated hospitality with tales or music, or simply by spreading news of the hospitality they received and therefore the fame of those who bestowed it. In order to claim hospitality, it may have helped to outwardly proclaim one's status, or rank, through items of dress like pins, and this could go some way to explaining why various groups across Europe chose to draw on similar designs. However, we can also imagine persons travelling for more commercial reasons; both those who wished to ply a trade and those trading in metals. That such persons are sometimes explicitly included in systems of hospitality is evident in the early medieval Irish laws.

It is argued here that ancient European traditions and laws of hospitality formed a long-lasting social institution. When different elements of this institution were abandoned is open to argument, however, in early and later medieval Ireland we clearly have historical records of a society which still operated within those parameters in a distinctly north-west European manner. This analogy can help us understand how this may have operated in later prehistoric Europe, or at least challenge our so called 'common sense approaches'.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my PhD supervisor Dr Carleton Jones of NUI Galway, Mary Cahill of the National Museum of Ireland and Professor Anthony Harding of the University of Exeter for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper, Professor Helle Vandkilde for permission to mention her work on the Pile hoard, Lisa Moloney for permission to mention her on-going work on Irish amber and the National Museum of Ireland for permission to use photographs from their collection. All opinions and any mistakes remain my own.

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Figure 1: Amber beads, bronze rings with buffer-shaped perforated projections (top), four bronze rings, four 'hair rings' (three with gold leaf around lead cores, one lead core only) and a lignite bead (bottom) from Tooradoo, Co. Limerick. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland.



Figure 2: Amber and gold beads from Cruttenclough, near Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland.

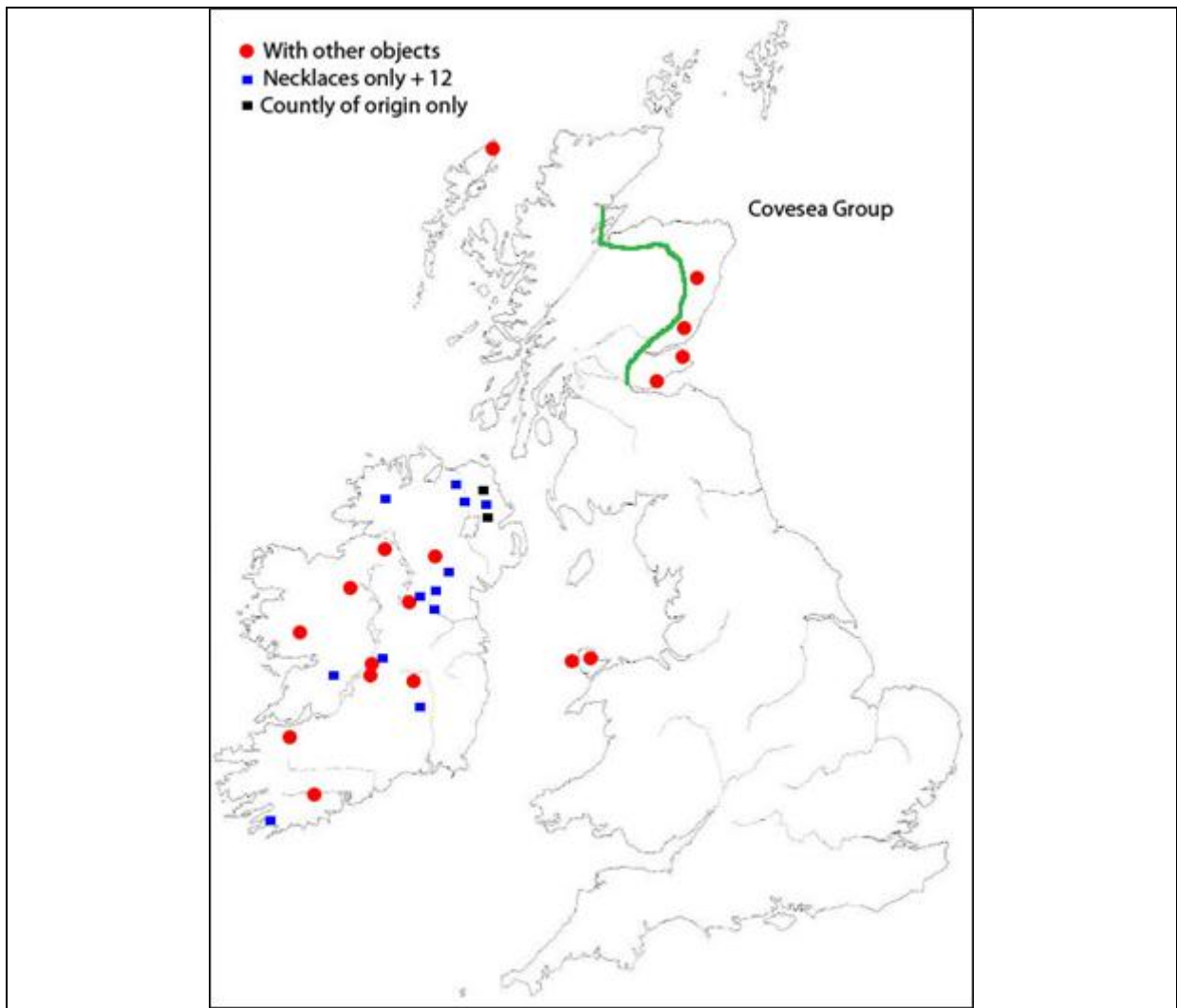


Figure 3: The distribution of Late Bronze Age Hoards containing amber in Britain and Ireland (adapted from Eogan 1999)